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An Excess of Goodness?

Volunteering among Aid Professionals in Cambodia

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Abstract

This paper explores the meaning of volunteering among professional aid workers. While they experience disenchantment in their daytime work, volunteering provides them with benefits lacking in their paid jobs. At the same time, a compensatory model does not capture the complex dimensions of this relationship. One motive behind their professional work – bringing about positive change for others - is also the driving force behind their voluntary practices. Such excess of doing good may be indicative of their overall commitment. If aid workers make sense of their actions within a framework of alienated labour, rendering their waged aid work as a commodity, volunteering emerges as a remedial response. At the same time, their paid and unpaid work is animated by the impulse of giving. Such co-existence implies that gifts and commodities are not mutually exclusive; or indeed that both can be understood, following Parry (1986), as emerging from a highly developed capitalist system.

Key Words: Aid workers, Cambodia, Charity, Volunteering, Professionalisation, the Gift

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A middle-aged couple from the Netherlands, Ian and Holly, regularly spent their weekends at a Buddhist-run home for adolescent girls on the outskirts of Phnom Penh; two aid workers in their sixties, Ruth and Bruno, were helping a Cambodian monk setting up a non-profit restaurant in their free time; a health advisor from Sweden, Annie, frequently brokers contacts between local charities and private overseas donors, taking their representatives on extended tours to potential recipients; a young Australian couple, Rick and Eva, help establish a NGO providing youth training courses in their neighbourhood. What they share is that in addition to their paid jobs in the development sector, in their spare time they were performing voluntary activities to help others. When I first became aware of this, I was surprised: were these people not already engaged in assisting others through their daytime jobs, in their role as full-time aid workers? In other words, had they not already paid their dues? If not, how might one understand

this apparent excess of charitable behaviour? On second thoughts, did these activities mean that they felt constrained by, or even alienated from their paid work – or did their volunteering simply allow them to better realise their desire to help others? Taking such questions as a starting point, the aim of this paper is to investigate their volunteering activities in more detail and to explore ways of making sense of them.

I encountered Ian, Holly, and others like them in the context of researching international aid workers in their capacity as mobile professionals in Cambodia. During a series of fieldtrips between 2009 and 2011, I spent time with Euro-Americans and Cambodians who were working for a range of aid agencies, including large and small international and national NGOs, multi- and bilateral organisations. Some of them had been in Cambodia for many years, others were there for a period of only two or three years; some had spent most of their working life on the international development circuit, and only intermittently returning to their countries of origin. While the people I engaged with held different roles in the development sector, including relatively high-ranking positions, working on a government level, the individuals who are at the centre of this paper could mostly be described as ‘middling’ aid workers. I use this term to refer to individuals with particular sets of expertise, whose main occupation at the time of my fieldwork consisted of full-time, paid positions with an aid agency. Their form of involvement in the aid sector matters, because the nature of their work has a bearing on the volunteering activities they engage in. It is important to be mindful of the fact that such volunteering activities were not necessarily common among all my informants, but characteristic of a particular segment of the aid worker community.

In order to contextualise their activities, it is important to be aware of Cambodia’s particular situation as a recipient of overseas aid. The country has experienced a turbulent and violent history, and has only relatively recently emerged from more than thirty years of civil war. Following the genocide by the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975-1979, it was occupied by Vietnamese forces, and reached a stage of relative stability only after general elections overseen by the UN in 1993. Since then, alongside a changing global geopolitical landscape, international aid agencies have established an increasing presence in the country. According to some estimates, the influx of foreign aid rose from \$550 million in 2004 to \$1.38 billion in 2012, and amounting to a total of \$10 billion from 1993 to 2013. At the same time, international and national NGOs operating in the country have grown rapidly, to a current number of around 3500 in 2013, according to the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia. The consequences of such foreign aid influx have been the subject of critical controversy. Sophal Ear, for example, has prominently argued that Cambodia’s dependence on foreign assistance has overall been harmful for the country’s development, including an entrenchment of bad governance practices (2012).

Outside the realm of academia, the way in which Cambodians view international aid agencies and their workers partly depends on their own position in relation to the overall aid system. Government officials might resent hosting yet another foreign consultant who is meant to bring ‘expertise’, yet is often found to be insufficiently knowledgeable of the challenges particular to Cambodia. The growth of national and international NGOs, however, has also presented opportunities for employment and training for its Cambodian staff. Meanwhile, while many Cambodians have severe misgivings about foreign interventions, they may also be able to leverage incoming funds in ways that they see fit. The views of ‘target populations’ of foreign aid offer a similarly varied picture. Jenny Knowles for example investigated

Cambodians' views of participatory development approaches, and found that 'contradictions between traditional organizational cultures, mandate principles, and locally-based donor environments' rather produced cognitive dissonance among local staff and arguably, beneficiaries (Knowles 2009:130). More poignantly, one Cambodian NGO deputy director remarked to me that 'I wish foreigners would stop coming and setting up NGOs here, thinking they know what is best for local communities'. It is in this varied and contradictory context that the experiences and activities of foreign aid workers are situated.

Aid and international volunteering

I would like to bring to the fore these apparently innocuous volunteering practices described at the beginning of this paper as I suggest that they are ethnographically meaningful and theoretically significant. 'Volunteering refers to the act of freely giving one's time, knowledge, or skills for the benefit of other people, groups, or causes' (Omoto & Snyder 1995; Wilson 2000). While there is ample research on volunteering within international development, here I am less concerned with the meaning and the effects of overseas volunteering as such. Instead, I propose that considering these particular activities can be instrumental for illuminating the nature of contemporary aid. In other words, I suggest that the particular constellation of 'aid workers who volunteer' provides a heuristic tool to make visible characteristics of aid work, which often remain implicit. This deviates somewhat from conventional approaches, which envisage the relations between overseas aid and volunteering in particular ways. Arguably, these have a long history, as since in the early stages of humanitarian efforts, for example in the aftermath of disaster and war from the 18th century onwards, and more recently in the decades since the Second World War, the involvement of volunteers has been a recurring feature in humanitarianism and aid. Most commonly, volunteers are regarded as a kind of development actor, whether they participate in state-sponsored programmes such as the Peace Corps or Voluntary Service Overseas, or more recently in the form of paying 'volunteer tourists', or in any of the individually initiated forms that volunteering may take.

These 'interconnected genealogies' of international volunteering and development, as Matt Baillie Smith and Nina Laurie (2011:548) describe them, have been the subject of substantial debate. A key issue is, for example, the relevance of volunteering for contemporary development practice and policy (UN Report 2011); the interrelation between volunteering, global citizenship, and neoliberalism (Vrasti 2012); a phenomenon that has gained prominence more recently, 'volunteer tourism' (Wearing 2001, Palacios 2010), and as a counterpoint to the figure of the development expert, which has emerged in the context of the professionalization of aid work. In contrast to these debates, the question I want to pursue here is not how activities by 'volunteers' and 'professionals' may be compared, or are in competition with each other. Rather, I wish to explore more broadly the interconnections that pertain between one person's volunteering and their paid work - in this case in the aid sector. One of the propositions made here is therefore a re-framing of the relationship between international volunteering and development, that is, to also understand their volunteering as a window on their professional experiences and practices as aid workers.

Alienation from ‘industrial aid’ work?

In order to explore the meaning of volunteering among people who have paid jobs in the development sector, it is imperative to adopt a perspective on aid as a form of work. This is worth stating explicitly, as the predominant focus in development studies lies on policies, programmes, and aid recipients, rather than on aid workers who act as intermediaries between the worlds of donors, policies, and local partners (Fechter and Hindman 2011). Even though the drive towards professionalisation has made aid workers more visible, pervasive discourses of charity, poverty, and partnership may still obscure the view of development as a form of work. At the same time, these discourses indicate that it is a particular kind of activity, combining to differing degrees altruistic and professional motives. Of course, aid work is not unique in that; it is a caring profession insofar as the ultimate, professed aim is to make a positive difference in the lives of others. As such, it is comparable to social work, teaching or nursing as carried out in the volunteers’ home countries. It is therefore not just aid as work, but work with these particular characteristics that constitutes the basis for, as well as the object of, analysis here.

As I further discuss below, one aim of this paper is to utilise aid workers’ volunteering as a diagnostic of contemporary aid practice. While the latter has been the object of searing critique, pertinent here is what could be called the ‘industrial aid complex’. This phrase loosely borrows from Teju Cole’s pithy coinage of the ‘white industrial saviour complex’ (Cole 2012). I take ‘industrial aid’ here as the established aid system comprising large international NGOs, multi- and bilateral aid agencies and donors, and the particular work practices and experiences that they engender. What matters specifically in this context is the relatively recent drive towards ‘professionalisation’ of the sector (see e.g. Walker and Russ 2010), as well as increasing managerialism, which is deployed as an antidote to the much-criticised inefficiency of aid (Gulrajani 2011). These can go hand in hand with the further entrenchment of professional hierarchies; they can be used to stifle dissent as well as validating particular kinds of ‘expert’ knowledge over others (Kothari 2005). Such large-scale aid systems also tend to involve substantial levels of bureaucracy, which may reinforce particular administrative pressures on workers, as well as reducing the opportunities to connect to their projects, and the ability to see their results. In addition, there are tendencies to require aid organisations to adopt patterns of logic and ways of operating that have been imported from the corporate sector. For instance, since 2011 DFID requires a justification of development interventions through a business case model, as part of their ‘value for money’ approach (DFID 2011). Such business logics exacerbate the expectations of aid workers to deliver specific outputs, which in the unpredictable and complex mesh of programme realities may add to their sense of being disenfranchised. Top-down changes of policy and funding decisions, which can oscillate in a dynamic policy environment, can leave those who are tasked with implementing them experiencing a lack of agency. Furthermore, such organisational distancing is exacerbated by the fact that many aid workers, especially those within larger aid agencies, tend to be based in offices in capital cities, and are not necessarily required to venture much into the ‘field’, or the people and communities who they are working to support.

I suggest that these conditions generate an ‘industrial aid complex’ and ask whether this results in conditions under which aid workers can become disenchanted with, or even alienated

from their work. Even though this form of alienation does not neatly correspond to Marx's theorisation of mid-19th century manual labour, the ethnographic material presented here invites drawing on the notion of alienation in a 21st century bureaucratic context. This is particularly poignant as, along with other human service professions, employees in this sector might least expect to suffer alienation. Whether one might extend this to regarding aid as wholly 'industrialised' may be subject to further deliberation. What matters in the present context is to explore the connections as well as disjunctures that pertain between aid workers' experiences in their paid jobs and those emerging from their voluntary activities.

One, perhaps obvious, interpretation of the connection between paid work and their volunteering draws on a compensatory model. This is illustrated in an anthropological analysis of transnational volunteers in a Malaysian Orang Utang rehabilitation centre (Parrenas 2012). Parrenas describes the case of Muriel, a Canadian who works for an insurance company, who paid for the opportunity to spend a month at the centre to carry out what Parrenas calls the 'custodial labour' of caring for Orang Utangs. She argues that the involvement of Muriel and the other volunteers 'has to be understood in a postindustrial context' (2012:682). More specifically, she suggests that 'Muriel and others like her in the Global North are deeply alienated from the products of their labor in the service economy' (2012:682). As a consequence, and to counteract this, the physical intensity of working at the centre, both in terms of their hard labour and their co-presence with the animals which it enables, leads to the volunteers 'phenomenologically engaging in the world by intensely inhabiting one's body and being available to feel affect' - something, Parrenas argues, that is not available to them in their everyday existences, performing their mundane jobs at home.

Parrenas thus points to an intrinsic connection between paid work and transnational volunteering. Here, the connection between the two activities is envisaged as remedial: transnational volunteering is redressing a shortage in affect that is caused by alienation from the products of one's labour. Taking this further, I argue that the volunteering of aid workers cannot solely or sufficiently be explained through paradigms of alienation and redress: instead, as I aim to demonstrate below, the relations between work and volunteering are as much characterised by continuity and extension as by rupture and alienation, as well as a range of other aspects. While these may well incorporate compensatory aspects, the practices of volunteering aid workers comprise multiple dimensions that are not easily captured in a merely compensatory model.

A different approach which, as a counterpoint, may help to tease out the nuances of these relations, can be found in the field of organisational psychology, and specifically the study of corporate volunteering. This refers to schemes where employers or corporations enable their employees to volunteer on company time for specified periods. Even though such activities are commonly located within the broader framework of corporate social responsibility (eg Muthuri, Matten and Moon 2009) this is not how I want to draw on them here. Instead, what some of the studies on corporate volunteering offer - in this case, couched in the disciplinary framework of organisational psychology - is a close examination of the links between what is called work design - the nature of one's job - and employee participation in corporate volunteering programmes. Adam Grant, for example, adopts such a 'work design lens' in order to illuminate continued employee involvement in corporate volunteering (2012:610).

With regard to methods, Grant proposes that the ‘work design literature sheds light on how the characteristics of both jobs and volunteering projects affect sustained participation’ (2012: 591). This resonates with my argument above that studying aid workers’ volunteering can be a heuristic device to elucidate the nature of contemporary aid work. In order to explain employee participation in corporate volunteering, Grant adopts a model that ‘integrates and extends theories of work design and volunteering’ (2012:605). This is because, ‘the design of work may have a substantial impact on the motives that employees experience in their initial volunteering episodes at work (...) the motives that employees expect to fulfil through corporate volunteering may be shaped by their jobs’ (2012:594).

Beyond focusing on the connection between the two, however, Grant, like Parrenas, adopts a compensatory perspective. When employees are faced with what he calls a ‘depleted job design’ - which is related to people feeling disenchanting, or alienated from their paid job in the aid sector - they are more likely to seek out corporate volunteering activities which offer a compensation for what is missing. As John Wilson argues in a seminal paper, ‘some volunteers are quite explicit about seeking compensation for deprivations they experience in their paid employment’ (2000: 221–222).

In contrast, I argue that while a compensatory perspective may partially capture the meaning of volunteering among aid workers, the material I present here suggests a range of other aspects characterising this relationship, which I discuss below. These include the possibility of volunteering not as redress to a depleted job design, but, in contrast, as an extension of the desire to help others - a motif that informs aid workers’ choice of paid employment, as well as their activities beyond it. This has wider significance, as I argue that two seemingly contrasting analytical frameworks suggest themselves to make sense of aid workers’ volunteering activities. On the one hand, one might argue that some forms of contemporary ‘industrial’ aid work - drawing on Marx’s theory of alienation in commodity production - could be understood as alienated labour. Such an approach partially underpins the explanations of organisational psychology as to what motivates corporate volunteers. As I will discuss below, a sense of being alienated from their paid employment - as in, producing aid as a commodity - is borne out by the ethnographic material from aid workers themselves. At the same time, in order to grasp their situation, it is also appropriate to draw on Mauss’ theory of the gift. As the evidence implies, aid workers conceive of both their paid and unpaid work as a ‘gift’ - insofar as both sets of activities are fuelled by a sense of a vocation to support others. This is theoretically relevant, as this could be read as an indication that these aid workers operate a commodity logic - aid being a product of their alienated labour - and the logic of aid as a gift at the same time. Contrary to conventional assumptions, which present these as opposed or even irreconcilable, this case then strongly suggests that these logics are not mutually exclusive, but that people inhabit both at the same time.

Of course, contributions to anthropological debates on the relationship between gifts and commodities have long recognised that commodity and gift exchange systems occur in tandem (Gregory 1982); or have gone further to argue that the contrast between them is a ‘fiction’ (Strathern 1988:144). Indeed, as Parry suggests, ‘an elaborated logic of the ‘pure’ gift is most likely to develop in state societies with an advanced division of labour and a significant commercial sector’ (Parry 1986:467). One might therefore understand the volunteering of aid workers as an apposite instantiation of Parry’s argument, insofar as aid work is firmly embedded within the capitalist logic. This is the case not just because of the way it is being

performed, but because this ‘industrialised’ mode of work is what propels aid professionals into providing aid in a voluntary, and thus gifting mode – even though this does not address the alienation and discontent experienced during their daytime jobs.

The meanings of volunteering

I spent some time with Ruth at her workplace in a provincial town. In the early evening, we meet Bruno at a small restaurant, which is run by a local NGO, headed by Van, a Buddhist monk, which provides training and support to disadvantaged local youth. Among other activities, the restaurant has been set up to generate income and to function as a training centre for the young men and women. The restaurant staff is part of a scheme to improve their skills and thus their job prospects in the catering and tourism industry. The cafe has only been open for a few months, and operations are still being smoothed around the edges. The interior is welcoming, furnished with bamboo chairs and tables, and warmly coloured textiles adorn the walls. Bruno and Ruth have been living in this town for more than two years, and often meet here for a drink after work. Today, they are discussing the emerging menu options for the café. They chat to the waiter, talking about the taster sessions they have recently had, and find out if their feedback has been taken on board. Bruno tells us that on his recent work-related trip to Phnom Penh, he visited a coffee-roasting business in order to select the variety of coffee bean that can be used at the restaurant. He thinks he has found a suitable one, and is helping with setting up the supply. Both Ruth and Bruno have been following Van’s efforts from the beginning, and have been engaged throughout. Van comes in later in the evening for a chat, dropping his car keys and mobile on the orange cushions, and talks about his day - he has been to the out-of-town area, where a group of families have been forcibly relocated. The eviction of people from so-called ‘informal settlements’ to areas far from the city centre is not uncommon, and dramatically reduces their opportunities to gain a livelihood. It is the young people of these families at whom his training programme is aimed..

The day after, Bruno gives me a ride to another village in his car. It is his day off; he is based at a local agricultural project, and his main objective at the moment is to help local potato farmers in setting up a cooperative, in order to improve their bargaining position and the price they can set for their produce. The process has been riddled with difficulties, but he is passionate about the project, and intent on seeing this through. Beyond his local project, though, he is riled by what he sees as the intrinsic inconsistencies of aid. He becomes agitated as he talks:

‘this is just one mega-business ... I can’t tell you all the things that are wrong with it. It is a waste of taxpayers’ money, the bureaucracy is crazy. The sheer amount of things that are going wrong. And the worst is, this is all politically wanted.’

Bruno continues, telling me about projects he has witnessed that were ‘set up to fail - it was clear that they could not work, they were hare-brained’, and how the ensuing failures were hidden from the donor and the public. He is especially angry and frustrated as he has learned a few days earlier that the scheme that is supporting the farmers’ cooperative will lose its funding

- despite him having made the case that this would be well worth continuing. However, this decision is the result of a policy change that he has had little sway over.

Even though Bruno is committed to the immediate project he is working for, the lack of agency in relation to broader funding decisions, the tense relationship with his line manager, whom he regards as incompetent, and the bureaucratic vagaries of the organisation that he works for contribute to his mounting sense of frustration and despair. In contrast, his relationship with Van and the staff at the cafe is characterised by the absence of a larger organisation, since the charismatic Van takes most of the decisions, even though he, too, relies to some extent on donor funding. In their interactions with the cafe staff, both Bruno and Ruth feel that they are being listened to; and even if their advice is not always taken on board, they feel that their views are valued. Sitting in the cafe that evening, Ruth remarks how happy she is about the orange colour scheme, which she has helped to choose. As the cafe is filling up with Cambodian and foreign customers, she is embedded in sociality which she has helped to create.

In this sense, their voluntary work with in the cafe is providing Bruno and Ruth with a sense of autonomy and agency that is not easily available to them in their paid work. The small-scale nature of the cafe - as well as, undoubtedly, their position as supportive 'white experts' - and their friendship with Van, allow them to engage in decision-making, and render the results of their efforts tangible to them and others. This is not necessarily the case in projects in their paid work. In Ruth's case, for example, she often finds it hard to progress her project in the health sector, and considers her local counterpart, a middle-aged Cambodian male manager, unresponsive to and obstructive of her efforts to implement the trainings which at the main objective of her advisory position. She recounts, for example, the efforts it has taken to establish cleaning routines, and even though she states that 'we're getting there, slowly', there is a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration at having to contend with bureaucratic and hierarchical regimes both at her workplace, and the organisation which employs her, which she could do little to change. In contrast, her engagement with the cafe has yielded not only tangible results - such as the warm, friendly atmosphere resulting from her interior design choices - but she has also clearly found the process enjoyable. She is in control of how much of her time to give, and it has created a small community of people with the shared purpose of getting the cafe off to a good start. Bruno's cherishing of autonomy, as well as his commitment to the farming project that he has been working on, is forcefully underlined by his subsequent trajectory. He eventually resigned from his job with the aid agency, settled in the provincial town, and continued to work independently with the farming community, aiming to help build capacity, and supporting their business activities. My data suggests that such a course of events is not uncommon; and indeed, among the small-scale, independent aid 'entrepreneurs' are those who have left the established sector due to precisely the kinds of disenchantment experienced by Bruno.

'This makes it meaningful': Contributions by and for individuals

Ruth and Bruno have a friend, Rick, who has also been active in supporting Van's cafe project. Rick used to run his own small business in the Netherlands, and fell into aid work as a result

of accompanying his wife to Cambodia when she became employed by an aid agency in a provincial town. Having arrived as an ‘accompanying spouse’, after a while he found a job with an international youth volunteering scheme. During this time, he also gradually became involved in a range of informal activities aimed at supporting others. When we met in the cafe, he drew my attention to features of the interior design, the wall hangings, and in particular the little black and white logo which he had developed as a trademark for the cafe. He pointed out the logo as it appeared on the menu cover, and explained, ‘it is really the small things that make it meaningful, where you can get involved and contribute as a person’. Apart from his work with the cafe, after a year of living in Cambodia he was asked by a Cambodian friend, Chenda, to help her set up a training scheme for young people aimed at providing English language and sewing skills, in order to improve their job and life prospects. Rick and his wife provided some of their personal funds to help with the start-up. While it was initiated and led by Chenda, Rick devoted considerable time and effort to establishing what, after a while, turned into a small NGO. While his wife continued her paid work in the aid project, he explained that ‘setting up this organisation is something that is really meaningful for me’. It is worth dwelling for a moment on Rick’s expressed sense of satisfaction. While he was overall content with his youth volunteering job, both the involvement with the cafe, and setting up the NGO, offered something else. In the first instance, being able to leave one’s individual mark, an identifiable contribution, even in the minute format of designing a logo, meant recognition of his personal involvement, which was not necessarily available elsewhere. Secondly, being asked to help establish the youth training programme, and his subsequent input, afforded him a level of agency which surpassed that of his job with the aid agency. Significantly, after a period of time where he managed both, Rick eventually left his job with the agency and concentrated full time, in collaboration with Chenda, on developing the NGO. I suggest that what makes actions being understood as ‘meaningful’ in this context is the importance of the individual, both in the sense of being initiated by, or originating from a person, as well as being aimed at particular individuals as the beneficiaries of charitable interventions. In Rick’s case, as in others, both of these ways in which ‘the person’ mattered were central to their sense of what made their activities meaningful.

One of the most pertinent, if implicit characteristics - at least of ‘middling’ aid work - is the lack of explicit recognition and tangible results of their efforts, and a sense of reward. This is a broader theme, which warrants separate discussion, including the strategies employed by aid workers to deal with this, which are beyond the scope of this paper. I argue, however, that one outcome from their volunteering activities can be just this sense of recognition and reward. Rick, for example, remarked that providing training to young people through their NGO ‘even if many drop out, if we just help one person, this is already something’ - the concrete achievement, combined with the personal connection, even if it would not be scaled up, gave Rick a sense of satisfaction which did not always emerge from his paid work mentoring international volunteers.

Annie, a health practitioner who worked as an advisor in a provincial hospital, was in a similar situation. When we discussed her work, she emphasised that ‘it is going well, actually, I’m really happy with it’. Nevertheless, Annie, who was an ardent football fan, had noticed that there was a youth football team practising close to where she lived. She found that while they had a regional tournament coming up, the team could not afford any kit, and usually played wearing plain T-shirts. Using her connections to the expatriate business community, she

launched a fundraising effort and was eventually able to provide the team with a set of sponsored team shirts. When we discussed this, she commented, 'it's an instant reward - you can see the success straightaway, which is not always the case at the hospital!' One can therefore argue that their volunteering activities are not always fuelled by experiencing fundamental alienation from their paid job, but that they are rather indicative of what people feel is missing from it, and of needs not met by it. In particular, this pertains to the desire for personalised, individual interventions - both in terms of intervening on behalf of an individual recipient, but also in the sense of leaving their own, personal mark through that intervention.

'They want something': Responding to demand

A recurring feature that surfaced in conversations about peoples' volunteering activities or their 'private projects', as some called them, and which they drew on to explain why they started working with people such as Van, was that they felt there was a genuine demand from Cambodian friends or acquaintances for them, as foreigners, to get involved. In the words of Rick, what kept him motivated was his sense that 'they want something' - a strong steer from his Cambodian friends, other local volunteers, and the young people whom the training was targeting to achieve something, an aim they had set themselves, and for which they were seeking to enlist the help of foreigners. This also became apparent in the case of Kira. She used to work as a marketing manager for an ethical business in Europe. In Cambodia she was based in a provincial town, and tasked with a project aimed at stimulating the rural private sector economy. This involved working with a group of rural-based women potters. One of Kira's initiatives had been to persuade the women to take more collective action in terms of pricing, marketing and selling their wares. She had spent much time in the villages, liaising with their informal leader, and trying to coax them into action along those lines. Nevertheless, when I visited her a year into her job, she professed that she found it hard going, and despite organising a pottery design competition, the results of her efforts had so far been limited and somewhat unsatisfactory.

This was in contrast to what happened to her a few months beforehand. As Kira recalled:

'One day I was at Sokha guesthouse, a local guesthouse frequented by foreigners when a monk walked in; he was looking for somebody called Gregor, to get him to do some English teaching. But there was no Gregor. So they kept asking me when they saw me, so in the end I said yes'.

Subsequently, Kira regularly spent time at the weekend at the Buddhist Pagoda, in order to teach English to the monks - an activity which she found rewarding. This was especially so, since this was at the monks' request. Such appreciation and recognition for Kira's input appeared in discernible contrast to her engagement with the women potters. The latter, she felt, 'had their own agendas', and their interests and motifs to some extent remained opaque to her. In contrast, the sense of being wanted made her voluntary English teaching with the monks meaningful, as well as giving a sense of personal connection. In addition, what drew Kira in

was that this connection appeared pre-ordained: the fact that the monks ‘found’ her in the guesthouse, seemed to her not accidental, but rather a matter of destiny. She saw it as confirmation that she was meant to follow their invitation, thus holding a personal meaning for her.

I suggest that this is significant, as it touches on a key issue - and often a sore point - in relation to aid work. While much of it is conducted under the auspices of ‘partnership’, relations between institutions - and between individual international aid workers and their Cambodian counterparts - can be strained. In Ruth’s case described above, one of the main reasons that she felt her project to be ridden with obstacles and progress slow, was that her Cambodian counterpart, an influential manager at the hospital where she was based, resented her presence there. Ruth complained that he had done much to prevent her project being implemented successfully, had withheld information, shown disrespect, and generally thwarted her efforts. Ruth thought that he might feel threatened by her, and found it exhausting to deal with him, but persisted nevertheless. This situation was in stark contrast to her involvement with the cafe, where she felt welcomed, her voluntary efforts were appreciated, and thus literally ‘in demand’.

Embedding: becoming part of the local social fabric

While aid work can in many respects be considered similar to that in a national third sector, there are also some marked differences. One which matters here is that international aid workers, by definition, live and work outside their countries of origin. While some are in relationships or have families, others are single or separated. All of them, however, are ‘unmoored’ from their friends and families at home. This is notwithstanding the fact that many aid workers have busy social lives, and a close network of colleagues and friends in Cambodia, as well as in other countries. Living abroad however, often in a succession of different countries, means that there is frequently a desire to embed themselves locally. This means, connecting to local social lifeworlds. Given that many current jobs in aid are based in offices and capital headquarters, such connections - beyond those with immediate work colleagues - are not always made, or do not evolve in ways that the aid workers find satisfactory. In Kira’s case, spending time with the monks at the weekend to teach English was one way of becoming, even in a small way, part of a local social fabric. This was complemented, for example, by feeling part of the family of her landlady, which was sustained by long chats in the courtyard, as well as by the fact that the family’s cook provided Susanne with her main meals, and she was consulted when they redecorated the bungalow she was renting from them. Even though that meant that she felt sometimes overinvolved - such as witnessing or being told of family quarrels and past tragedies - this created social and emotional bonds that she appreciated.

Ian and Holly, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this article, were another case in point. Holly, a social worker, was employed as an advisor to a local NGO focusing on youth. She was committed to her work and built a good relationship with Heng, her local counterpart. Both Holly and her partner, Ian, who had accompanied her to Cambodia, were keen to avoid what they called the ‘expat lifestyle’, aiming to embed themselves locally as much as possible. Thus, they consciously eschewed Western-style comfort or restaurants; they did not own a car, and used motorbike taxis instead. Ian, who was the main home-maker, emphasised how

important it was for him not to frequent the Western-style supermarket with its fluorescent-lit, neatly stacked shelves and freezer cabinets, but to buy their groceries from the local open market. The fact that such behaviour, by a tall, blonde, European male, tended to evoke looks and comments from market traders and other customers, hardly bothered him. If anything, he saw this as further confirmation of his critical view of other foreigners, who, he thought, should engage in such encounters more often.

An additional and different way for both Ian and Holly to achieve such embedding was the relationship they formed with a Buddhist-run orphanage for adolescent girls on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. They spent much of their free time at weekends at this orphanage and became not just regular visitors but supporters, building relationships with the girls living there. Given Holly's experience of running a children's home in Europe, she became an informal advisor to the woman in charge of the orphanage. Their involvement eventually tailed off when there were mounting disagreements between them about the management of the home. While this may signal similarities with her paid work, a key difference was Holly being able to withdraw of her own volition – a response not available to her in her day job. These aspects notwithstanding, volunteering there and spending time with the girls provided an important way of making meaningful connections, shaped by their active contribution, to local life worlds which were not easily rendered through other means. It is worth considering how this reflects on the nature of contemporary aid work. Even in situations where aid workers felt they had a good, solid working relationship with their local counterpart, such as in Holly's case, there was still an excess need to connect outside of the circumscribed realm of their NGO work. This was the case even when the basis for these other connections was at least partly provided by her professional contributions. More broadly, one can also argue that such embedding-through-volunteering addresses not only shortcomings of aid work, but also of the un-embedded nature of aid life more generally.

Using professional and amateur skills

In the context of corporate volunteering, the possibility of gaining new knowledge and skills, as well as improving one's job prospects, plays a role when people decide to volunteer (Grant 2012:593). I suggest that the case of aid workers is more complicated insofar as their volunteering activities sometimes employ their professional skills, such in the case of Holly in her capacity as a social worker. At the same time, however, what they enjoyed during their volunteering was being able to draw on existing skills that were not called on in their day job. As may be expected, aid workers who had backgrounds as health practitioners for example, repeatedly used their medical expertise to support others. Ruth employed a housekeeper, for example, whose sister sustained serious injuries in a motorbike accident. When Ruth visited her in hospital, she spotted a critical neglect of care, which, if allowed to continue, was likely to have had fatal consequences. As Ruth intervened with the relevant hospital staff, she was able to secure a change of treatment of her housekeeper's sister. Even though her professional contribution made a significant difference, Ruth recounted this in a matter-of-fact manner, as something she had done many times during her long years working abroad. What animated her in a very different way, however, was being involved in the interior design of the cafe as mentioned above, enjoying how her selection of fabrics helped create an environment which

bore very much the imprint of her own taste. I suggest that what was evident among Rick, who designed the logo, Bruno, who identified the perfect coffee variety, and Kira, a non-native speaker, teaching English to monks, was the joy of the amateur: the possibility for extending themselves beyond their professional remit, and to be engaged as a whole person with particular tastes and creative ideas which went unnoticed and unused in their daytime aid work.

Assuaging guilt and performing charity

So far, many of the volunteering projects that I have described could be understood as remedial or compensatory, in the sense that these practices address shortcomings of their daytime jobs, or a ‘depleted job design’, as Grant would put it (2012:593), thus providing a sense of meaning or reward which they would otherwise be deprived of. A less obvious aspect brings us back to my initial reaction upon registering these volunteering activities. The expectation that aid workers, by virtue of choosing a job that benefits others, relocating themselves and sometimes their family, and sometimes accepting a lower salary than they might receive at home, had already gone some way in order to do good in the world, or to satisfy their ‘impulse of philanthropy’ (Bornstein 2009). It turns out, however, that some of their volunteering could indeed be compensatory, in the sense that being paid for helping others invalidated it as an instance of ‘doing good’, in the form of pure charity. Their daytime job did not count towards this, because it was salaried. In some instances, volunteering therefore helped to assuage a sense of guilt that was not addressed through being a paid aid worker.

Rick was a case in point. As described above, he had been instrumental in setting up a small NGO in his provincial town, as well as a range of other supportive involvements. He explained his and his wife’s attitude:

‘we don’t consider ourselves idealists, in the sense of giving away your last shirt... but you do what you can, not just through work- because that’s paid, anyway- but through paying for our cook’s catering course, the guard’s English course, putting up our own money as seed corn funds for our neighbour’s NGO... that kind of thing’.

‘Doing what you can’ here refers to a moment of charity, or pure giving. Not always, but in some cases, this was also related to assuaging some of the guilt which people felt as wealthy foreigners facing everyday poverty around them, and being aware of their material privilege. Rick had reflected on this, and elaborated on his way of assuaging guilt:

‘The way I’ve found for myself, to deal with this guilt, is to contribute privately so I don’t have to feel bad that I’m coming home and there’s a coke in the fridge, or a beer; or that I can switch on the aircon in the bedroom. It’s about finding a middle way so I don’t have to castigate myself for having a good standard of life’.

Even among those who did not explicitly mention a sense of guilt, what mattered was that their ‘philanthropic impulse’ could not be realised through their day job. To realise the impulse, they needed to give their efforts, time, and sometimes money, for free. The importance of this

became apparent in the case of Ian. As an accompanying spouse and IT specialist, he had become involved as a volunteer in a Khmer language software development project. Due to strong interest and sufficient funding from donors, his project partner was able to pay Ian a salary - half of which Ian immediately donated to the project, since accepting the full pay would have denied him the possibility of charity, and thwarted the implementation of his wish to give.

In other cases, acts of spontaneous charity sprang less obviously from a feeling of guilty privilege, but were borne out of an all-encompassing habitus that entailed helping others where necessary and possible. Annie for example recounted how once, as she was driving through the countryside on her motorbike at the weekend, she spotted a boy at the roadside who was suffering from what she identified as a severe case of hernia. So she stopped, talked to the boy and his family, and together with a friend arranged for the boy to be taken to the capital to have it operated on during the following days - an operation which she paid for herself. As Annie remembered, 'it [the hernia] was in such an advanced state, if I hadn't done anything, he would have just died of it quite soon'. When I asked her a while later why she engaged in such acts of charity, she had not given much thought to the issue, but explained, 'for me at least, if you live in a developing country, you can't just leave things like that - poverty basically - on your doorstep when you get home'. In this sense, such engagements were part of a broader commitment to aid which underpinned not just their work, but the totality of their lives in Cambodia.

Aid as Vocation

So far, the practices presented here point to what is missing or not fulfilled through aid workers' paid activities - such as lack of recognition, social embedding, or the wish to give. In this sense, their volunteering represents a rupture from their day jobs. I have argued above, however, that a compensatory perspective does not fully capture the meaning of their activities, and that their volunteering represents not just discontinuity, but also an extension of their work. More precisely, both paid and unpaid work are driven by the same motive of supporting others, which may be best described as a vocation. While the term 'vocation' stems from a religious context, such as a vocation to a total commitment to Christ, it may also describe an individual feeling drawn to, or destined to engage in an all-encompassing life purpose. I use the term here to refer to individuals whose entire lives are informed by a single calling – in this case, to improving the lives of others. A illustrative case in point is that of medical doctors, who take unpaid leave from their work in the Global North in order to perform voluntary medical work in the Global South for specified time periods. In the same way, some of the aid workers volunteer as an extension of their day work, in areas of expertise that are related or dissimilar, drawing on professional or amateur skill sets. Their aim in volunteering could be described as 'doing more of the same'. They undertake this, however, with the intention of performing aid differently, and in their view better, or through alternative means, than is possible in their daytime work.

Annie, for example, had an entrepreneurial mindset. This had led her to become involved in the aid sector in the first place, as she volunteered to work for a charity in the immediate aftermath of the Tsunami in 2004, and subsequently spent a year in Sri Lanka for an international NGO, without prior humanitarian experience. Her current post in Cambodia

had followed on from this. As mentioned above, Annie was keen to point out that her work at the provincial hospital, after an uneven first few months, was going as well as could be expected, and that she was well-liked and respected by her Cambodian colleagues. In her spare time, however, Annie utilised her entrepreneurial attitude to act as an informal broker between overseas visitors who represented potential private donors- such as philanthropic organisations, but also local church communities in European countries- and local individuals and NGOs. On weekends, she would on occasion take these potential donors on extensive regional tours of worthy causes: for example, she showcased the project of a young Australian who was helping a poor community build new homes; a European doctor who ran a small-scale child sponsorship scheme; and a local Cambodian man who had set up a children's home. Such volunteering, I suggest, is best understood not in contrast to, or as compensation for, what her day job was lacking, but as an extension of it, insofar as she was able to effectively mediate between potential sponsors and aid recipients in a way that others would not have been able to do, thus extending aid work through other means - her brokering skills- for securing positive outcomes for others.

Similarly, Holly, who was quite satisfied with her work at her youth NGO, nevertheless relished the opportunity to get involved with the disadvantaged girls' home on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. In this activity, she was drawing on her experience, being able to contribute - in this case, an extension both of the paid work she had been doing at home - running a children's home- as well as of her desire to support Cambodian society, utilising her existing skills and expertise. In this sense, this represented what Grant calls 'value concordance and identity continuity', albeit offering more autonomy, as well as a form of local belonging, than her day job could offer.

As I have demonstrated, many of these individuals understand their paid as well as unpaid aid work as corresponding to the same vocation. A subsequent question is how they view the asymmetry, and dependency which to some extent is inherent in aid work, but which it may also reinforce. While aid workers are often acutely aware of the shortcomings of the activities of their organisation, they usually endorse the imperative of 'international aid' in principle. The asymmetry that is manifest in their work and everyday lives is thus understood as part of the rationale for their presence in the country. If anything, their unpaid work is viewed as, if not more effective, then at least a more personally fulfilling way of addressing these asymmetries.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to explore the meaning of volunteering among professional aid workers. A key premise for this has been to consider international aid as a form of paid work, which allows a distinction between the activities that sustain the livelihoods of these individuals, and the activities that they undertake in their free time. In the first instance, these particular practices offer us an innovative reframing of the relationship between international aid and volunteering. While these are historically entwined, the activities of paid aid workers are emphatically distinguished from those of volunteers or voluntourists. The case studies here serve as a reminder that these activities are frequently undertaken by the same individual: aid

workers who volunteer. Such conventional framing likely stems from the tendency to consider volunteering as typically carried out by people who are not in gainful employment, such as the young seeking to gain a foothold on the career ladder, or the unemployed and the retired in search of social validation and belonging (eg Muehlebach 2012).

Studies of corporate volunteering provide an alternative model, as they bring paid and voluntary work done by employees into a single analytical frame. Such analyses of voluntarism during corporate time, however, interpret these activities as mainly compensatory: the ‘depleted work design’ of a corporate job fuels employees’ desire for volunteering, which addresses needs not provided for in their paid work. Applying this ‘work design lens’ to the realm of international aid is instructive, as aid workers’ volunteering functions as a heuristic tool, highlighting characteristics of contemporary aid work which are not made systematically explicit elsewhere.

What do such kinds of volunteering tell us about international aid? And is it appropriate to classify these as compensatory practices? As the case studies demonstrate, there is evidence of individuals’ disenchantment with, or even alienation from, their daytime work. Their volunteering provides them with a range of impacts and benefits that are lacking in their paid jobs. These include increased autonomy, agency and creativity. By contrast, volunteering provides meaning by making individuals matter, by offering immediate and tangible results, and by providing a sense of responding to local demand. An important dimension was the ability to become part of local social fabrics and forging individual relationships with Cambodians. The joy of expanding their activities beyond the confines of their everyday jobs added a significant aspect to these experiences.

Such a diagnostic of the aid sector suggests that it is characterised by hierarchy, bureaucracy, and an emphasis on policy and structure that leaves insufficient room for individual significance or agency. In this sense, aid workers’ volunteering can be understood as compensation for, and a corollary, of the alienation and disenchantment brought about by an ‘industrial aid complex’.

At the same time, I argue that a merely compensatory model, setting alienated paid work against private volunteering, does not capture the complex dimensions of this relationship. Rather, while these activities are in some ways contrasting, there is also continuity between them. Specifically, the very same motif which partly fuels aid workers’ professional work - that is, instigating positive change in the lives of others - is also the driving force behind their voluntary practices. Such excess of doing good may be understood as indicative of their all-encompassing commitment, construing aid as a vocation which pervades their professional as well as their private lives. This is theoretically significant, as it suggests that aid workers may make sense of their actions within a framework of alienated labour, rendering their waged aid work as a commodity, and which designates their volunteering as a response to this. At the same time, their paid and unpaid aid work is animated by the impulse of giving to others; from a Maussian perspective, they would both be considered as gifts. Such a co-existence of contrasting frameworks implies that gifts and commodities are not mutually exclusive; or indeed that both, as Parry (1986) suggests, are part of a highly developed capitalist system.

Beyond these insights, the drivers of volunteering still bear compensatory traces: an additional incentive to engage in individualised aid work is that it offers the opportunity to perform it differently, according to their personal priorities. Furthermore, being an employee

in a human service profession does not necessarily make the desire for philanthropy disappear. Rather, the fact that their aid work is paid renders it invalid as an instance of pure giving, thus initiating acts of 'excess charity' which fulfil this impulse. It may therefore be appropriate to envisage the relations between aid work and volunteering as not just separate, contrasting, or compensatory, but as linked in multiple ways that offer insights into the nature of the aid system, voluntary practices, and the individuals engaged in both.

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